

FIRST AUSTRALIAN RECORD OF EURASIAN WIGEON (ANAS PENELOPE)

By LES GEORGE

26 Shallcross Street, Carnarvon, Western Australia 6701.

On 6 March 2013 while carrying out bird surveys on the lower Gascoyne River at Chinamon Pool (24 51 32 S, 113 40 42 E) near Carnarvon I observed a duck that I did not immediately recognise. Its initial appearance being that of a very bright – headed Australian Wood Duck, which was present at the time. I left the paddle craft to complete the bird count from the southern riverbank so as not to put all the remaining birds to flight then returned to focus on the strange duck. I did not have any reference books at hand but considered that it might be a Northern Pintail. Upon returning home I consulted two field guides covering birds from South East Asia and determined that the bird was most likely a male Eurasian Wigeon. Realising the significance of the sighting I returned later with a small camera in order to photograph the bird. This proved difficult as it was very timid and the closest approach it would tolerate was 200 m. Several photographs were eventually taken and the bird was observed in a variety of situations including swimming, dabbling, preening both on and out of the water and in flight. It was observed in the company of

other ducks but seemed equally content on its own. My previous full bird count on Chinamon Pool was on 22 January so its arrival time was between that date and 6 March.

A photograph was emailed to the WA Museum and its identification was confirmed as a Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*).

A description of the bird is as follows: about the size of Pacific Black Duck; head and neck deep chestnut, with a creamy buff coloured blaze on the central forehead and fore-crown; with the neck outstretched the chestnut extended slightly deeper on the foreneck than on the hind-neck where it merged with the grey brown to grey of the back. Upper back and flanks appeared greyish. Wing coverts white forming a white bar at rest and large white panel on upperwing in flight; scapulars long and edged white on the outer margin, speculum appeared dark, and long prominent black tertials with bold white edgings. Tail feathers whitish the central ones black and tail appeared pointed but rounded when spread in flight. Lower foreneck below the chestnut pinkish spreading across the upper breast and sides



Figure 1. Adult male Eurasian Wigeon at Carnarvon. Photo B. Huggett.

of flanks. Lower breast and belly whitish. Flanks grey with a vertical white patch at its rear margin and undertail coverts black forming a bold black and white vent region. Bill pale blue with black tip, legs dark grey and iris appeared dark brown/black (see photo).

The description of the individual seen (an adult male in breeding plumage) is typical of the species. As with many other northern hemisphere ducks this one has radically different alternative non-breeding plumage, this is assumed with a post-breeding moult starting May–June with the assumption of the breeding type plumage resumed again by October–November. In this eclipse plumage the male more closely resembles the female.

The adult female plumage is very different from that of the adult male. Essentially it is an all brown duck, although the basic colour can vary from a greyish brown (grey morph) to a warmer richer brown (rufous morph). In both morphs the head is finely speckled darker but is generally greyer or paler than the remainder of the plumage. The body plumage is either rather plain or mottled having paler margins to the feathers but is not so obviously patterned as that of most *Anas* species. The entire belly area is in all cases or plumages contrastingly pure white. In flight the upper wing coverts show as a dull grey brown panel (the feathers have pale margins but not obviously so at any distance, and the green/black speculum of the adult male is much duller. Bill is similar to adult male but is of a duller darker grey colour. Legs dark grey.

Adult male in eclipse (non-breeding) is essentially similar to adult female including having a range of colour morphs but in all types the colour of the head, breast, flanks and margins of feathers of upperparts tend to be a richer more rufous buff tone. The large white panel in upperwing is as for breeding male. This plus the pure white belly area (as in adult female) are good field characters. Bill colour remains as adult breeding or only slightly duller than that of the male. In both of these plumages the species can be easily overlooked.

Habitat

The river pools at the time of the observation are joined; they have a substrate predominantly of coarse river sand, some sedimentary rock and clay banks. Some sedimentary mud remains in depressions as water levels drop and waterweed grows prolifically. Water levels were higher than might have been at this time of year, I believe this is due to the fact that the last river flow had a high saline content and water that would normally have been abstracted from beneath the surface sands along much of the lower Gascoyne River for irrigation purposes had not happened. A sand bank that is forming will eventually separate this water body into two separate pools about 500 metres apart. River Gums are the predominant vegetation on the immediate riverbank, backed by Acacia scrub and introduced Buffel Grass. Some patches of cane grass/bamboo exist near water as well as some reed species including Typha.

Normal range

This species is widespread, breeding in the northern Palearctic and wintering in equatorial Africa, southern Palearctic, Indian subcontinent, South Tibet, central and southern China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and North Philippines. Stragglers have been recorded south of this range.

Possibly the furthest south this species has previously been recorded are New Guinea and at Lake Tondano in North Sulawesi where a female was collected on 18 February 1931.

REFERENCES

COATES, B. J. and BISHOP, K. D. 1997. *A Guide to the Birds of Wallacea, Sulawesi, The Moluccas and Lesser Sunda Islands, Indonesia*. Dove Publications, Alderley, Queensland.